



# St Mark's Review

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No. 223, February 2013 (1)

## Promise and Fulfilment

Preaching the Prophets and Luke's story of Jesus



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# Editorial

‘Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near.’

According to Matthew’s Gospel, this is the essence of John the Baptist’s opening proclamation (Matthew 3:2). Mark’s and Luke’s Gospels bear this out: ‘And so John came, ... preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins’ (Mark 1:4). Matthew and Luke record another essential element of the Baptist’s message: ‘Produce fruit in keeping with repentance’ (Luke 3:8).

‘Repent, and then produce fruit in keeping with that repentance!’ Whether they had come out from metropolitan Jerusalem or were from rural Judea, those who went to see and hear John the Baptist should have understood fully his firm injunction to produce fruit. They knew about growing fruit on the vine, good crops and poor returns, vine-dressing, harvesting and the ever-present risks posed by the climate and by predatory animals and voracious birds.

John’s first listeners also knew about the depiction of Israel as God’s vineyard (Isaiah 5:1–7, Psalm 80). They knew about the failure of their own forebears to produce the fruit required by their God in response to his demonstrations of divine mercy and heavenly generosity.

Jesus, in his metaphors as well as in his parables, drew heavily on the imagery of the vine, of vineyards and of people working at different times of the year in the vineyards. He even made a direct link with John’s preaching in the so-called ‘Parable of the Two Sons,’ those who were directed by their father to go and work in the vineyard (Matthew 21:28–32). ‘For John came to you to show you the way of righteousness,’ he said, referring to John’s injunctions to repent, and then to produce fruit in keeping with repentance. The force and effect of Jesus’ words are unmistakable: ‘Do as the Father has directed. It is not sufficient to give lip-service to the Father’s commands; the will of the Father must be obeyed.’

‘Repent, and then produce fruit in keeping with repentance!’ These two injunctions remain central to the messages every preacher should be conveying into the new church year. But for those of us charged with proclaiming these messages in the affluent and increasingly urbanised West, the use of

imagery that depicts the production of fruit is probably more picturesque and poetic now than relevant and polemical. A continuing challenge for the followers of Jesus is to re-present the truths of God's Word while using language our audiences are able to hear and figures of speech which to them become real.

The focus of this issue of *St Mark's Review* is predominantly on preaching the word of God in the current church year, namely, Year C in the *Revised Common Lectionary*. The emphasis in this issue is on Luke's Gospel and the Acts of the Apostles, with two contributions from Jeanette Mathews addressing the mode and meaning of Old Testament prophecy.

In the recent past *St Mark's Review* has presented papers designed to guide and to contribute to preaching during Years A and B ('Fulfilling the Law: Preaching Matthew and Moses' for Year A in *St Mark's Review* No. 216 and "'The Way of the Lord": Preaching the Psalms, Mark and the Catholic Epistles' for Year B in *St Mark's Review* No. 219).

The current issue, like those which have preceded it, draws its contents mainly from the annual preaching seminar conducted by St Mark's National Theological Centre. In this issue of *St Mark's Review* we are fortunate to have an additional paper from A/Professor David Neville which complements his earlier study, "'The Spirit of the Lord is upon me": Preaching from Luke in Year C', which appeared in *St Mark's Review* No. 213.

May you be spiritually inspired and your preaching reinvigorated as you read this issue, and may there be much fruit borne as a consequence of your applying what you learn.

# Preaching from the Minor Prophets

Jeanette Mathews

## **Why preach from the Old Testament at all?<sup>1</sup>**

St Mark's National Theological Centre's annual one-day preaching seminar focuses on the coming year's lectionary texts in order to help lay and ordained preachers prepare. There are usually Old Testament texts set for each week but these are sometimes ignored. We should remember that Jesus, the early Church, the Gospel writers and other New Testament writers were immersed in the texts and teachings of the Old Testament; we should begin where they began. In Year C there are particular connections between Jeremiah and Luke but the focus of this paper is on the Minor Prophets, a less represented and less discussed genre of prophetic literature. Despite the designation 'Minor', these books include some major theology. It sometimes surprises people to know that Paul's great insight of justification by faith is almost a direct quotation from Habakkuk!

When comparing texts from the Old and New Testaments, we need to bear in mind the continuity between the portrayal of God in the Old Testament and the God who is the Father of Jesus. And yet, as pointed out by Fleming Rutledge, 'It is remarkable how many Christians continue, unthinkingly, to speak of "the God of the Old Testament" as though this supposedly wrathful and judgemental God had been supplanted by an endlessly tolerant and

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indulgent Jesus.<sup>2</sup> Perhaps we have the 'quest for the historical Jesus' partly to thank for this, since it has promoted Jesus' humanity and particularity as a first century Jew as the pre-eminent picture of God. Admittedly, we are sometimes unsettled by portraits of God in the Old Testament: in the Minor Prophets themselves we have the Lord relenting (Amos 7:3), changing his mind (Jonah 3:10), commanding a faithful prophet to marry a harlot (Hosea 1:2) and acting compassionately towards the bitter enemies of his chosen people (Jonah 4:11). But these texts that we need to wrestle with before we can extract their blessing are a reminder to us of another great truth about God, as transmitted by Isaiah: 'for my thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways, says the Lord' (Isaiah 55:8, NRSV).

It is instructive for our understanding of God, therefore, to immerse ourselves in the Old Testament witnesses. Especially there we learn of the characteristics of holiness, wrath, jealousy, sympathy and compassion. A repeated refrain describing the character of God occurs also in the Minor Prophets: 'Merciful and gracious, slow to anger, abounding in loving kindness and faithfulness' (Exodus 34:6; Numbers 14:18; Psalms 86:15, 103:8, 145:8; Joel 2:14; Jonah 4:2).

Another important reason to include the Old Testament in our preaching is our context: in a post-Holocaust world and one where interfaith dialogue is essential we should be showing respect for the Jewish faith and recognising that these Scriptures do not need Christian interpretation to hold life-giving revelation.

### **'Minor Prophets' in the lectionary**

When turning to the Revised Common Lectionary, the term 'Minor Prophets', unfortunately, is an appropriate one. With the exception of Jonah, books from the corpus of the Minor Prophets appear in the Sunday lectionary only in the cycle for Year C and even then not all of the twelve books are represented. A twentieth century annotated edition of the Revised Common Lectionary notes that an attempt was made to include at least one reading from each of the Minor Prophets in order to fulfil the desire to have at least one reading from each book of the Bible. 'In the end, it was decided that such a mechanical principle worked against the concept of a unified lectionary, and with regret, only a few of the Minor Prophets were included.'<sup>3</sup>

Nonetheless, Year C is the year that *does* feature a number of these books. During Advent the texts that are chosen are messianic prophecies,



so perhaps they are taken out of their original context somewhat. The verses from Joel 2 were undoubtedly chosen for Ash Wednesday due to their emphasis on repentance. In Ordinary Time we have two groups of texts (weeks 15–18 and 30–32) with a variety of subjects. As is common in the lectionary, the readings from the Old Testament are chosen to complement the Gospel. Luke's interest in social justice as evidenced in his choice of parables match well with the themes of the Prophets (and here I include Jeremiah who is heavily used in Year C).

### **'Minor Prophets' in current research**

The lectionary's handling of these books does them a disservice in at least two respects. First, these books may be smaller in volume than Isaiah, Jeremiah and Ezekiel but they are not 'minor' in their message. Here are some familiar phrases, all of which come from the so-called Minor Prophets:

- But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream (Amos 5:24).
- I desire steadfast love and not sacrifice (Hosea 6:6).
- Take courage, all you people of the land, says the LORD; ... My spirit abides among you; do not fear (Haggai 2:4).
- Do justice, love kindness, walk humbly with your God (Micah 6:8).
- As you have done, it shall be done to you; your deeds shall return on your own head (Obadiah 15).
- The LORD is good, a stronghold on a day of trouble (Nahum 1:7).
- The righteous live by their faith (Habakkuk 2:4).
- Not by might, nor by power, but by my spirit, says the Lord of Hosts (Zechariah 4:6).
- Return to the Lord, your God, for he is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love (Joel 2:13).
- See, I am sending my messenger to prepare the way (Malachi 3:1).

Second, recent scholarship on these books has focused on their unity rather than their diversity. Scholarship for many years treated each book individually in relation to their assumed historical background and analysed each in isolation from the others, but there is now a more serious attempt to view

the Minor Prophets as a single collection: the Book of the Twelve. There is evidence that this collection of twelve prophetic books existed from very early on and was transmitted on a single scroll that is equivalent to the other three prophetic scrolls (Jeremiah, Isaiah and Ezekiel). These four scrolls, together with Joshua, Judges, Samuel and Kings, compile the second major section of the Hebrew Bible: the Former Prophets or *Nebi'im*. The number twelve is significant of course, and many scholars think that Malachi, the last book, was originally part of the same composition as Zechariah but the books were deliberately shaped to form twelve separate but linked prophetic works. Creative editors and compilers deliberately brought the books into relationship with one another via catchwords and thematic associations. So when we preach from individual texts from the Minor Prophets we should always have an eye on how the individual text relates to the whole.

### **A chronological shape for the Book of the Twelve**

Historically-specific superscriptions or historical references in many of the books suggest a deliberate chronological ordering that presents the story of Israel's experience from the eighth to the fifth centuries before the Common Era. The introductions to Hosea, Amos and Micah all recall kings and events of the eighth century which was the period of Assyrian domination. Nahum, Habakkuk and Zephaniah are set against the fall of the Assyrian Empire and the rise and decline of the Neo-Babylonian Empire in the seventh and sixth centuries. Haggai and Zechariah mention the post-exilic Persian emperor Darius so are placed in the fifth century under the Persian Empire.

The books that have not yet been mentioned still fit within this historical framework. Joel picks up the end of Hosea with a call to repentance and ends with a pronouncement of judgement against the nations, which is how the next book Amos begins. Obadiah deals with the judgement against Edom, the nation that sprang from Esau, thus linking with the end of Amos that speaks of Israel's judgement: the descendants of brothers Jacob and Esau share the same fate in that both nations disappeared from history around the same time. Jonah, quite different from the other books in style and theme, nonetheless fits in the Assyrian period due to its subject matter as well as the reference to a prophet of the northern kingdom during the reign of Jeroboam II named Jonah ben Amittai (2 Kings 14:25). And Malachi, the last book, presumes a fully-functioning temple and must therefore come from the time of the Persian Empire after the temple had been rebuilt.

Interestingly, although the Book of the Twelve covers the period from the eighth to the fifth centuries, it does not deal with the actual fall of Judah and destruction of Jerusalem. Zephaniah is set at the time of Josiah, one of the last kings of Judah before exile, and the next book, Haggai, presupposes the people are already back in the land and rebuilding the temple. The Isaiah corpus has a similar structure since it covers the same time span but also skips the destruction of Jerusalem. The prophetic books of Jeremiah and Ezekiel fill in that gap.

### **A theological shape for the Book of the Twelve**

As well as a historical shape in the Book of the Twelve that suggests a deliberate compilation, a theological shaping can also be discerned. Paul House postulates an overall story of sin, punishment and restoration in the theological structure of the Twelve.<sup>4</sup> Christopher Seitz has a similar view, but focuses more on God's role as just and patient but not without limit.<sup>5</sup> The individual prophets whose books make up the Twelve for the most part serve as models of faithful obedience to this God.

These historical and theological perspectives are important to consider in sermons on texts from the Twelve. Whilst calls to repentance and obedience are valid at any time, when preaching on prophetic texts we should help people to see their relevance to their original audiences. Micah 5:2–5a (Advent 4) is a good example: it finishes at Micah 5:5a with a reference to the ruler that will come out of Bethlehem as a man of peace, but immediately following is a reference to the invasion of the Assyrians. The significance of the prophetic word, at least on one level, should be considered in the context of the threat of invasion and suffering that lay behind its original transmission. The words about a ruler (notably *not* a messiah) 'whose origins are from of old' undoubtedly referred to the covenant made with David and speak of the hope that new leader from the family of David will release the people from their present oppression. The reference to a woman in labour and return of the brothers could well be addressed to the exilic community, using the metaphor of labour pains that will come to an end and result in a new existence.<sup>6</sup>

### **Theological themes in the Book of the Twelve**

As well as the overall theological shape from sin to restoration, there are several themes that serve to unify the Book of the Twelve. James Nogalski

nominates four recurring themes: the Day of Yahweh, fertility of the land, the fate of God's people and theodicy.<sup>7</sup> We now examine each of these themes with a sample of how each theme has been incorporated into sermons based on texts from the Minor Prophets.

### ***Fertility of the land***

One prominent theme is God's control over fertility of the land through either blessing or punishment. Texts on this theme include reference to God's gift of produce, drought, famine, locust plagues and other natural disasters (see, for example, Hosea 2; Joel 1–2; Amos 4, 9; Haggai 1–2; Habakkuk 3; Malachi 3). These texts quite likely had historical foundations in actual calamities – the land of Israel was subject to flood and famine – and often resulted in national times of prayer and fasting. These texts may have special reference in our own setting where climate change threatens the natural world. In the context of a locust plague threat facing south-east Australia following floods and an unusually warm spring, I began a sermon on the Joel lectionary text with reference to hotlines to call if locusts were spotted, regular updates on government websites and even the opportunity to 'nominate a locust hero' – someone who had gone beyond the call of duty to prepare a property or help a neighbour or community. I went on:

What is different for us and Joel's community is that we've been warned. Devastating though a locust plague may be, our farming communities have been given time to prepare ... When Joel spoke of a locust plague he described an event that was entirely unexpected, destructive of the whole community of Israel in the days before large cities, and one that genuinely threatened the survival of the nation. The description is so graphic that there is still debate about whether Joel was describing a locust plague as if it were a military attack or describing a military attack as if it were a locust plague. Either way, the people of Judah were experiencing a disaster of major proportions.

### ***Theodicy***

Another theme that I think can be profitably explored in sermons on books from the Twelve is that of theodicy: the question of God's goodness and power in a world marked by disorder and evil. Many of the books oscillate

between God's justice and God's compassion: Jonah is perhaps the most memorable as it deals with the question in a graphic and actually quite humorous way. The prophet questions whether God's pronouncement of judgement on a wicked nation amounts to anything if grace and compassion is the response to what seems a very quick and easy repentance. But several other books also question God's justice in the face of evil and look towards a day of judgement when wickedness and righteousness will be properly dealt with. In the meantime, faithful obedience is what is required of God's people.

Recently I preached a series of three sermons focused on the three chapters of the book of Habakkuk. The titles for the sermons were 'Lamenting Honestly', 'Acting Honourably' and 'Living Faithfully'. Habakkuk begins with lament – anguished questions of the prophet addressed to a God who seemed to be unaware or uncaring that his people suffered. These verses are in the lectionary and could be used to preach a sermon exploring theodicy, or the value of lament, or the nature of suffering. Here is an extract from the sermon 'Lamenting Honestly':

What I find really helpful in this first chapter of Habakkuk is that it gives us permission to question God, to complain about injustice, and to honestly express our frustration and fear when our circumstances give rise to those emotions. Nowhere in the book does God rebuke Habakkuk for saying such things. Our Jewish and Christian ancestors preserved these angry words as part of Scripture, much the same as they preserved a large number of psalms of lament and vengeance – texts that we sometimes find quite uncomfortable. What we should notice is that Habakkuk is addressing *God* with his complaints. He might be angry and sarcastic – but he is praying – and because they are prayers they are still acknowledging that there is a relationship between the prophet and his God. Because they are said in the context of a relationship, they don't have to be polite. Prayer in Scripture is by no means always praise of God.

### ***The day of the Lord***

A third theme, perhaps the most prominent in the Book of the Twelve, is the 'day of the Lord', sometimes 'that day' or 'day of distress' (three of the

lectionary texts use this theme: Joel 2; Amos 8; Zephaniah 3). The motif is used in contexts of both judgement and promise, so must be understood not as reference to a single incident in history but rather to decisive moments in which God acts. For the Israelites this might have referred to the fall of Jerusalem, or the fall of the terrible Babylonian empire, or the accession of the more lenient Cyrus of Persia to power, or the return from exile. New Testament writers use this theme in their citations from the Book of the Twelve more than any other. In the New Testament, the day of the Lord is related directly to the Christ event, and is also used in relation to both judgement and promise.

This theme is pertinent in the season of Advent, but another time in the church calendar where it is picked up is Ash Wednesday. In a sermon I preached on Joel 2 (the same sermon that was introduced by the locust plague) I tried to pick up the two sides of 'that day':

In the short book of Joel there are two overriding themes. There is a theme of judgement which leads to repentance and a theme of deliverance that leads to renewal. The book opens with a description of an attack on the community of Judah. It may be literally a locust plague, or may be metaphoric speech for an attack by an army; either way it was unexpected and devastating. The message that Joel has is that it was a disaster brought about by God himself and therefore was a judgement on the community. The prophet calls the community to repentance and prayer, to an acknowledgement that something new is needed in their relationship with God. One of the commentators I read had a helpful statement, he said the purpose of repentance is not to make people feel bad, or even to make them feel good, but to allow God a chance to engage in renewal. And when the prophet goes on to describe God's deliverance, the renewal that he speaks of is in extravagant terms with words like abundance, plenty, overflowing.

And yet the book also mentions 'the day of the Lord' and describes this future day as a terrible day – with portents of blood, fire and smoke. Joel's prophecy goes beyond his own community's judgement and renewal to remind us that

the whole world and the whole of history ultimately stand under the judgement of God. I sang Mozart's Requiem as part of a choral group. One of the recurring choruses is *Dies Irae* – 'day of wrath' – the Latin words translating to something like 'What dread there will be when the Judge shall come to judge all things strictly.' The music is sombre and spine-chilling. Judgement is a serious business, but even in Mozart's Requiem, just like in the words found in the book of Joel, words of God's mercy surrounds words of judgement; God's mercy gathers those who repent and offer newness.

### ***The fate of God's people***

The fourth theme follows the theological shape of punishment and restoration. Prophets from both Israel and Judah pronounce judgement, call for repentance and offer eschatological promises of deliverance. That these messages can coexist in the same individual book reflects the biblical pattern of Israel's relationship with God which fluctuates between apostasy and covenantal commitment. Always there is a thread of faithful obedience, predominantly offered by the prophets themselves who serve as models for faith in the Book of the Twelve, but occasionally expressed through others (such as 'the people of the land' in Haggai or the pagan sailors in Jonah). As well as an overall movement towards restoration in the Book of the Twelve, most individual books are shaped to end on a note of hope. This is an important message throughout the church year, but especially in Advent, and the following extract is from a sermon preached during the Advent season:

Zephaniah also had a message of hope and joy for Jerusalem, addressed to Daughter Zion or in parallel poetry the Daughter of Jerusalem. It is addressed to the ones who had steadfastly clung to their faith despite the turbulence of their historical experience of being attacked, ransacked and carted off into captivity. While some were saying the downfall of Jerusalem meant that God had abandoned them, these faithful ones had been witness to the fact that God *had* remained in their midst. It was the experience of Exile that gave rise to the term Immanuel – God with

us – such a precious reminder of the truth of Advent that God comes to dwell amongst humanity. In the promises of Zephaniah the Daughter of Jerusalem would find that with God in her midst all her needs would be met – she would have nourishment, tranquillity, and security. Often in the prophetic books the term ‘on that day’ is a term of terror – an announcement of judgement. But Zephaniah gives a new and positive meaning to the phrase by embedding it right in the middle of a series of repeating ideas that encourage the daughter of Zion to trust in her God. It is a chiasmic arrangement of words in the text that is easier to see when it is set out visually moving towards a central point and back again:

Sing aloud ... shout for joy  
The lord has turned away your enemies  
The lord is in your midst  
You have nothing to fear  
ON THAT DAY  
Fear not  
The Lord is in your midst  
A mighty saviour  
The Lord will rejoice over you ... he will sing joyfully<sup>8</sup>

This announcement that God, too, joins in the joy of restoration, that Yahweh will rejoice over *us*, is a wonderful reminder that worship is never one-way. Does God, too, exuberantly and gladly enter our world with joy? This text suggests that he does.

## **Conclusion**

It is worth reiterating that sermons on prophetic texts should take the original context into account. But a lot of detail in the prophetic books is left deliberately vague and I think that is helpful. If we did have a very obvious setting for the texts we might be tempted to leave them back in the past and think they are not relevant to us now. Instead, because the circumstances are fuzzy, the message can be crystal clear. The God the prophets talk about



is our God. The disasters the community experience are our disasters. The hope they talk about is our hope.

In the lectionary readings for Year C, fortunately a number of the Minor Prophets make it onto the stage to participate in our weekly liturgical dramas. But several have been overlooked. The Book of the Twelve covers almost three centuries of God's interactions with God's people. Alongside the angels, apostles and martyrs we affirm in the *Te Deum* that 'the noble fellowship of prophets' join in praise of God. As preachers, we have the privilege of faithfully handing on the story of God's workings with his people. We must not neglect these not-so-Minor Prophets.

## Endnotes

1. Some helpful resources in answering this question include Craig Bartholomew and David Beldman, *Hearing the Old Testament*, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 2012; Fleming Rutledge, *And God spoke to Abraham*, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 2011; Grenville Kent, Paul Kisling and Laurence Turner (eds), *He began with Moses: Preaching the Old Testament Today*, InterVarsity Press, Nottingham, 2010. For the corpus of the Minor Prophets in particular see Elizabeth Achtemeier, *Preaching from the Minor Prophets*, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 1998.
2. Rutledge, *And God spoke to Abraham*, p. 6.
3. Consultation on Common Texts, *The Revised Common Lectionary: 20th Anniversary Annotated Edition*, Augsburg Fortress, Minneapolis, 2012, p. 114.
4. Paul House, *The Unity of the Twelve*, JSOT Supplement Series, Almond Press, Sheffield, 1990, pp. 63–109.
5. Christopher Seitz, *Prophecy and Hermeneutics*, Baker Academic, Grand Rapids, 2007, pp. 214–16.
6. See Daniel Simundson, 'The Book of Micah', *The New Interpreter's Bible*, vol. VII, 1996, pp. 570–71.
7. James Nogalski, 'Recurring themes in the Book of the Twelve: Creating Points of Contact for a Theological Reading', *Interpretation*, vol. 61, No. 2, 2006, pp. 11–22. See also Nogalski's commentaries on the Minor Prophets: *The Book of the Twelve: Hosea – Jonah*, Smyth & Helwys Publishing, Macon,

2011 and *The Book of the Twelve: Micah – Malachi*, Smyth & Helwys Publishing, Macon, 2012.

8. As suggested by Walter Vogels, 'Zephaniah', in *The International Bible Commentary*, Liturgical Press, Minnesota, 1998, p. 1179.

# Performing Habakkuk

Jeanette Mathews

## **Learning from Leunig: 'how to get there'**

The scratchy cartoon-strip image in the Michael Leunig calendar on my office wall stared down at me. Entitled 'How to get there', it seemed to present a wonderful metaphor for the journey of theological study. The little man with the big nose and the swag on a stick slung over his shoulder has been told 'how to get there':

Go to the end of the path until you get to the gate. Go through the gate and head straight out towards the horizon. Keep going towards the horizon. Sit down and have a rest every now and again. But keep on going. Just keep on with it. Keep on going as far as you can. That's how you get there.

## **Learning from Habakkuk: some resources for that journey**

I have often heard Leunig described as a modern day prophet. If I wanted to choose one prophet in the Old Testament whose message resonates with Leunig's, it would be Habakkuk! Having spent a few years meditating on this not-very-long prophetic book, I think I can offer some resources from Habakkuk for our theological journey – the one that may never really end.

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### ***Reflecting on the world***

In the Old Testament, prophets were the messengers of God's words, often of God's judgement, aiming to get God's people to mend their ways and speaking out against the injustices they saw, both in the nation of Israel and in the surrounding nations. They were the most obvious points of encounter between God and the world; they offered critique, analysis and visions of alternative realities. And isn't this what we are aiming towards as we study theology? We are studying to mediate between God and the world, our society, our church communities and our friends and family.

### ***Finding things we don't expect***

As the book of Habakkuk begins we are led to expect this sort of prophetic message. The opening words are very conventional: 'The oracle that the prophet Habakkuk saw'. This is a prophet, a person recognised as an intermediary between God and the ordinary people. The words tell us that this prophet had a vision, which is another thing that sets the prophets apart. And the word 'oracle' was often used to herald a message of judgement against another nation. So there are three ideas set forward in that short introduction: the spokesperson of God, the vision he had and the message of judgement he was to deliver against Israel's enemy. But then comes something we don't expect. Rather than a prophetic word there is a heartfelt prayer of anguish.

How long, O Lord, shall I call for help but you do not listen. I cry 'violence' but you do not save. Why do you make me see wrongdoing and look at trouble? Destruction and violence are before me. Strife and contention arise.

Here is a man of God, living in a world of pain and suffering, and not knowing what to say other than to ask, 'why?'

Despite our expectations as we study theology, it can at times be a real struggle to make those connections between God and the world or between Scripture and our lives. But the prophet Habakkuk, with his words of lament addressed to God, shows us that questioning God and struggling for answers is as valid a part of the journey as finding them.

### ***Bringing our own voice into the conversation***

As we keep reading through the first chapter of Habakkuk we see that the first response from God is not acceptable to the prophet. Habakkuk challenges God in a series of further accusations and questions, then positions himself

to wait for an answer. In the first part of the second chapter we discover something very interesting. In most English translations we read 'I will stand at my watch post and keep watch to see what he will say to me and what *he* will answer concerning my complaint'. But the best text witness for the Hebrew actually says 'I will stand at my watch post and keep watch to see what he will say to me and what *I* will answer concerning my complaint'. In other words, the prophet, who has not been satisfied with the things he has been offered in response to his despair, suggests that *he himself* may have a contribution to make to this conversation with God. We already know that this contribution includes complaint and lament - the honest expression of frustration and sorrow. As we read on we see the prophet offering further prayers, visions and affirmations of faith. For this prophet at least, the theological journey involves a conversation *with* God in which the human voice and experience have a role. We are invited to bring *our* questions, *our* suggestions, to learn to trust our *own* voice as we discover new ideas.

### ***Conversing with God in the company of others***

The book of Habakkuk is largely a conversation between the prophet and God. But there are several points in the text where plural verbs and pronouns draw attention to an audience that is both present and involved. This reminds us that studying theology is not a solo pursuit. Leunig's little man might be seen disappearing into the horizon as a lone figure, but we have the privilege of studying in the company of others. Face-to-face discussions are valuable opportunities that we have in class but even the on-line learning environment can contribute to knowledge and wisdom for students and teachers alike. Processing, discussing and integrating this learning into our everyday life and faith are goals that should be recognised in this journey despite stress and deadlines.

### **Finding God's justice**

Halfway through Habakkuk chapter 2 we finally hear some typical prophetic speech in the form of woe oracles pronounced against those in power who oppress the vulnerable. Here at last is an answer of sorts to the prophet's questions of where is God in the face of suffering. Within the woes are descriptions of the downfall of the oppressor – not as a result of any direct 'lightning bolt from heaven' but as a consequence of the actions of injustice. From the perspective of faith, tyranny can never have the last word. The

holiness, justice and compassion of God are the attributes celebrated by this prophet and the attributes that drive our quest today to know the same God.

### **Worshipping**

Habakkuk 2 concludes with an acknowledgement of God's sovereignty and an invitation to worship. Worship becomes the context for the rest of the prophetic book.

### ***Finding and holding onto hope***

And so our questions and our experiences, even if they are difficult ones, need to be integrated into our faith. Part of that integration is honestly expressing our pain as well as our joy. The other part of the integration is finding and holding onto hope. The penultimate paragraph in Habakkuk expresses such hope and steadfastness in the midst of suffering in some well-known words:

If the fig tree does not sprout  
and no produce is on the vines,  
If the yield of the olive tree has failed  
and fields have not produced food,  
If the flock has been cut off from the fold  
and no cattle are in the stalls,  
Yet I will exult in the Lord,  
I will rejoice in the God of my salvation.

### **Walking forward: performance!**

But it is the final line in the book that takes us back to Leunig and our quest to get there. Again the literal translation of the Hebrew serves us well: 'Yahweh is my Lord and my strength. He places my feet like the hinds' and on high places he makes me walk'. And then there are some instructions in the manner of the psalms for the way in which this book is to be recited. The final words in the book are about performance. The prophet's reflections end with a verb: He makes me walk. Keep on walking. Keep on going. And then there is an invitation to go back to the beginning and do it all again. Because how we get there will be a lifelong journey calling for faithful re-enactment of the words of this prophet and indeed of all of our biblical heritage.